

Closing of Charmin Mill Hurts, But Little Rapids Not Giving Up

By John Lee Press Gazette Staff Writer Nov 5, 1967

Little Rapids teeters on the brink of limbo reserved for communities that never quite made it.

Latest nudge occurred Nov. 1 with closing of Charmin Paper Co.'s Little Rapids mill. The pulp mill, which employed up to 50 men in its hey day, no longer produced a product of vital concern to the parent company.

A dwindling workforce of 12 mill hands at Little Rapids has dispersed. The throb turbine, the beaver-bite of eight grinders has been stilled and wind direction is longer gauged by smoke drifting over the Fox River from the tall stack. Except for one retiree, local pulp makers have been transferred to the mainstream Charmin operations at Green Bay.

Locktender Holds Fort

Little Rapids commercial erosion is just about complete. But there will be a Little Rapids as long as there is a Fox River. Holding the fort today is Gilbert Clark, veteran locktender at the government dam and boat locking facilities adjacent to the mill.

The downhill glide is comparatively recent. it began soon after World War II at the deaths, within a brief period, of the Woodward brothers, whose general store had long been a rural landmark.

With the general store went and the post office and eventually the Northwestern depot. More recently pupils at Little Rapids School were transported elsewhere. The school building was sold for salvage last month.

Otis One of First

Now it's the mill's number that is up.

Arthur Otis of De Pere, who retired six years ago after 50 years at the Little Rapids mill served as waterboy to the crew constructing the plant and was one of the first hands employed by Lindauer and O'Connor, when their new mill went into production of pulp.

Otis recalls the great expectations generated with opening of the mill in 1910. There were rumors of a companion paper mill on the drawing boards. The mill on will prospered but the Lindauers who took personal charge and lived at Little Rapids, were apparently entrepreneurs. They sold out after a few years and left the area.

Little Rapids pulp was in great demand from the start. Made from the finest spruce, shipped in by rail, the mill for years contracted to furnish all pulp to mills making the stock used by Sears. Roebuck in printing their voluminous annual catalogues.

1922 Flood

The depression years. Otis recalls, affected crew strength somewhat but area farmers continued to make side money in winter by unloading the carloads of pulp logs arriving daily at Little Rapids. The mill never shut down except during the 1922 flood that took out the local dam and left the mill race bone dry from June through October.

Spruce eventually became scarce and expensive, Otis recalls. Popple, on the other hand, was sprouting all over the north country cutover, Little Rapids successfully made the switch when in 1950, Charles Egan of De Pere renovated operations to utilize popple and provide a top grade bleached pulp.

Charmin became a principal customer and eventually acquired the Little Rapids plant. Capacity reached 50 tons per day. The pulping process involved production of popcorn-like fluff, that was immediately blown into boxcars for transportation to Green Bay. A characteristic of the process that made it convenient was that the bleaching period coincided with the time-lag in delivery of the new pulp.

Inevitable Phase-Out

The sliver in the log pile emerged slowly and subtly and it hurt. Charmin began developing new papers calling for less and less raw pulp of the type produced in their Little Rapids operation.

Thus the inevitable phase-out climaxed by a complete shut-down on Nov. 1.

Clark, born and reared on the island behind the mill where his father was lockmaster before him, said it was his grandfather's original farm above the mill that Luther Lindauer selected for a stock farm when he arrived at Little Rapids. S.S. Clark's home-stead was then owned by Gilbert's father, Leslie. Lindauer built a model farm of the era, specializing in the breeding of thoroughbred draught horse s. Some of the structures are still utilized as part of a modern dairy farm.

Tragedy Struck

Clark recalls activity at the company-built hotel and boarding house above the mill; also early residents of the half-dozen company houses which remain, part of the mill physical property.

Clark mused that the mill was taken pretty much for granted good times and bad, except for Clark days when tragedy struck. Two men died violent deaths over the years and in a close-knit community such tragedies loomed large in local folklore.

There is little chance that a ghost town can occur in the Fox River valley. A bright sign on the county trunk still announces "Little Rapids", people, mostly commuters to business and industry in nearby cities, are building new homes, and closing of the 'mill' may have only jarred Little Rapids in a new direction, not necessarily over the brink of oblivion.

Little Rapids History

Editor, Press-Gazette: I read in the Press-Gazette about the pulp mill going out of Little Rapids. It was the last of the little village to go.

About 60 years ago, there was the mill, school, depot and a general store owned by George Woodward. At his retirement, two of his sons took over the store.

The post office was in the store building, Frank being the postmaster

Roy was depot agent for the Chicago North Western, the depot being near the store.

The train didn't stop for the mail pick up. The mail sack was put on a pole and hooked into the mail car as the train passed through. Later, the post office was discontinued and all mail went to West De Pere where it was delivered on Route 1, Ed Turriff being the first mail carrier with his top buggy in the summer and a cutter in the winter.

There were no cars, TV, or radio, The only source of information was the telegraph, telephone, mail, and the grapevine.

The street car line ran through the village from Green Bay to Kaukauna.

The farmers can still be proud of their nice farms, Little Rapids will always be on the map.

E. E. G.

Townsend, WIs.

(11/16/1967)